

# The Disaster Management Research Network of Northeastern Brazil



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*Jennifer Goldstone*

[Photo: Brazilian favelas (slums) are vulnerable to mudslides.]

In northeastern Brazil, where droughts occur periodically, the poor face disaster on many fronts: loss of jobs in agriculture, water shortages, and — on the hilly slopes of cities — mudslides and disease when the rains finally come.

"Disasters don't affect everyone the same way," notes economist Renato Duarte of the [Joaquim Nabuco Foundation](#), a federal research institution that conducts development-related research. "People who are excluded from resources and power suffer terribly, often having to move away, while landowners who are better off frequently have access to public funds to cope with the hardships of the drought."

## **Palliative measures**

Over the years, however, government measures have been palliative at best — providing some emergency water centres and salary compensation, while withdrawing from such traditional areas of government support as education and social services. At the same time, northeastern Brazil is dealing with the consequences of pollution, forest depletion, and soil erosion, making drought just one of many problems facing the region.

Against this backdrop, a team of Brazilian researchers has launched a disaster management research network, with assistance from the [University of Manitoba](#). The network is designed to strengthen the capacity of the [Universidade Federal da Paraíba](#) (UFPb), the [Universidade Federal de Pernambuco](#) (UFPE), and the Joaquim Nabuco Foundation to address local, regional and national needs created by natural disasters.

## **Network activities**

Among its activities, the network collects information on the effects of drought, coping strategies, and policies. It also advises governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at the municipal, state, and national levels on urban hazards such as mudslides, and how to prevent or control them.

The initiative began in 1992 with funding from the [Canadian International Development Agency](#) (CIDA) to strengthen UFPb and upgrade the education of faculty. In 1994, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) provided additional funds to support research on disaster management and help promote the network. The Canadian project director is [Tom Booth](#), a professor of biology and botany at the University of Manitoba, who spent 1994-95 as a visiting professor at UFPb and helped launch the research network.

## **Collaboration**

"The project [has] forged closer collaboration among the three campuses of UFPb," notes Rosa Godoy, head of the university's history department in Joao Pessoa. It has also brought together people from a variety of disciplines: botanists to examine the potential of beekeeping as a form of income generation; researchers in desertification, soil erosion, and development of slums; anthropologists to study how women earn money in times of drought and to explore alternative sources of income; water management experts; and psychologists to consider what motivates people to migrate and how this has changed community structures. Often, researchers from different fields have worked together on a common problem.

"Interdisciplinarity is an approach we learned from the University of Manitoba," says Dr Godoy. Before the project began, her university was less connected to the local people's problems. "We have learned to intervene, not just to conduct research," she adds. This activism comes at a time when more Brazilians are turning to their academic institutions for help.

## **Women's role**

And their institutions are responding. Take, for example, the work of [Adelia Branco](#). Through the CIDA-funded project, she completed her PhD in anthropology at the University of Manitoba and did her field work in Brazil. Dr Branco was the first person to study how women's economic activity counteracts the effects of the drought. During her study, she was impressed by women's ability to organize craft-making, sewing, and other projects as well as the vital role played by NGOs and labour unions in supporting women and informing them of their rights as workers.

Now head of the women's program at the Joaquim Nabuco Foundation, Dr Branco has received IDRC funding to study how women are affected by drought. In partnership with a specialist in geographic information systems, she is exploring how to improve agriculture and increase people's incomes in a coastal area. As fish stocks decline, the combination of human and natural sciences research may guide people to alternatives.

## **Disaster prevention**

Looking ahead, network participants would like to see an increase in political will to adopt disaster prevention measures that assist the poor. In the meantime, some members are informing people through the media about simple measures they can take to protect their homes when it rains, such as planting trees and banking slopes, and about income-generating schemes to help raise them out of poverty.

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[Stopping Landslides in Rio: Recycling Scrap Tires into Retaining Walls](#), by Keane Shore

[Natural Disaster Prevention \(Costa Rica\)](#)

[Quake-proof Adobe Housing \(Peru\)](#)

[Volcanoes and Earthquakes — Disaster Prevention](#)